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An Investigation of the Design and Execution of Large Scale Studio Paintings

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DESIGN AND EXECUTION OF LARGE SCALE STUDIO PAINTINGS

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At the age of eleven, I had a very close friend two doors up the street. Carl and I would spend a great deal of time playing in his grandmother's house, a large and mysterious nineteenth century mansion. Its yellow brick walls, red tile roof, and white massive columns stood in the summer sun like a beacon for all the children on the block. Saturday mornings were the special times for exploring the attics, cellars, and rooms of the house, many of which remained just as they were when Carl's grandparents first built it. It was a sacred repository to us, filled with countless treasures of the past.

Every Saturday noon, we were invited by Carl's grandmother for lunch in the middle parlor. It was a great room exactly in the center of the first floor with the only light coming from a crystal chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. We would seat ourselves in overstuffed chairs as the maid turned up the lights to reveal an incredibly beautiful room. There were oriental rugs, antique furniture, and huge paintings hanging on every bit of available wall space. I remember most of them

being dark and vague with occasional forests and fields. There was one exceptional painting that rested above the mantel of the fireplace. It was three-quarters sky, with grey, threatening clouds, but in the distance you could pick out flashes of sunlight that sparkled with little highlights. I was impressed that someone had actually made sun light out of paint and for hours I sat there entranced by the huge picture.

Eventually my family moved to another town and I lost Carl and the house as friends. Most of all, I lost the opportunity to see the big pictures in the parlor. Recently, I returned for a visit, and at first chance, went to see the house again. It was empty of its people and furnishings and paintings. I sat across the street and watched the sun strike on the red tile roof and curve its way around the white columns. It sparkled and shone like the flashes of light in the paintings and I could remember clearly the huge picture over the fireplace.

Years later, when I began to paint, my immediate concentration on landscape came about because of my

impressions of these pictures. I was encouraged to take instruction in traditional painting methods to further my interest in landscapes. It was then that I began the practice of taking outdoor sketches and using them as the foundation for studio paintings. The quick impressions on paper taught me to see more than simple constructions, and they fast became color, design, and detail formulas for larger paintings. These small drawings are done in a variety of media and usually measure no larger than eight by ten inches. At this size, I can control the entire picture area with minimal eye movement, giving me an accurate glance at the scene I have recorded. This "first glance" is the most important point, for me, in the beginning of a picture. Actually my first glance colors my feelings and emotions for the landscape I see before me. Corot advocated the use of first impressions because he believed it is important to capture the immediacy of the landscape. In 1856, he observed:

> Be guided by feelings alone. We are only simple mortals, subject to error; so listen

to the advice of others, but follow your own convictions. It is better to be nothing than an echo of other painters. The wise man has said: When one follows another, one is always behind. Beauty in art is truth bathed in an impression received from nature. I am struck upon seeing a certain place. While I strive for a conscientious imitation, I yet never for an instant lose the emotion that has taken hold of me. Reality is one part of art; feeling completes it. Before any site and any object, abandon yourself to your first impression. If you have really been touched, you will convey to others the sincereity of your emotion.

This early influence of Romanticism lead me to observe the actual construction of paintings by Corot and his contemporaries. While Corot's palette was fairly simple, (eight colors), I adopted the following opaque palette based upon his:

White lead	Burnt Sienna
Cobalt blue	Cadmium red medium
Cerulean blue	Yellow ochre
Raw Sienna	Naples yellow
Chrome oxide green	Venetian red
	Black

Burnt Sienna is applied in a thin wash over a leaded canvas to give a rich red paint surface.

This red tint is extremely important because of its relationship with the other colors, especially blues and greys. While this is basically an opaque palette, the colors are glazed over the red surface with pure sun-thickened linseed oil. This particular medium provides enough versatility with its viscosity to allow for either rich brushwork or glossy smooth glazes. It also controls the thickness or density of the color glaze. Take for example the blue in a sky. Cerulean blue can be applied in a pure tube form over the top of the red underpainting and many varying intensities will result.

There are two other colors I have found to be useful. Both Sap Green and Olive Green have very fine glazing qualities and can be used to create incredibly black and dense areas. However, one should be cautioned about their lack of permanence.

My preference is to work the pictures "wet into wet". If I am to be pushing a lot of paint over the surface, I usually start with the sky and work down to the horizon. This allows me to overlap the painting areas. At this point, when transferring

the small drawings onto large canvases, there are certain problems to overcome. The horizon and foreground must be established early in order to obtain the correct colors and perspective. Where the picture starts in space is perhaps the most difficult decision. Shifting the point in space where the viewer stands will create different amounts of middle ground. On large canvases it is even more important to be sure of the exact foreground because of the large areas to be filled. Many early landscape painters solved this problem by elevating the point of view, so that it appeared to be from a second story window. This allowed a smooth transition from front to horizon without compressing too much space. I use this to emphasize many changes that might occur in landscapes. This makes it possible to "look over" different types of terrain through to the horizon. If the basic design is sure and sound, then the magnification on to the larger canvas produces no problems.

My recent paintings have been "idealized" landscapes in a sense. I am influenced in my pres-

ent work by many different landscape painters. At this point, I feel that I draw quite a bit from the "Regionalists". They are usually grouped as those painters of rural life in the thirties and forties. This is generally referred to as the "American Scene", although there are many urban painters in this category too. The "American Scene" actually has two sub-categories, the other being "Social Realism". Ben Shahn is one example of the latter.

Regionalism is not strictly a term for mid-west rural painters. It was originally used to describe several Southern writers, especially John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren. They emphasized the people and activities peculiar to that area. Regionalism was later applied to painters working in any one specific area with strong emphasis on the area's people and their environment.

These painters had intense emotional ties to their surroundings. Men such as Adoph Dehn, John Stewart Curry, and Joe Jones used their rural environment to express a deep communion between the

people and the land. Reginald Marsh and Isabel Bishop painted the urban city life exclusively, yet conveyed the same feelings. There were also a few painters who bordered on Regionalism, but dealt with different problems. Edward Hopper was one who had a strong tendency only to be concerned with aspects of formalism, such as light and form.

I am influenced by the kind of painting these people produced. I feel that I share the same feeling for the vastness and power of the earth. That is one reason why I started working on a larger scale to create a broad environment for the viewer. My aim is to confront the spectator with the fact that nature is overwhelming. The paintings are done in a style that perhaps overemphasizes the isolation and tranquility that is found in nature.

I strive for the same simplicity and quiet in my own personal life. My instinct for idealized landscape regulates the type of painting I produce. The atmospheric skies, rolling clouds, and extreme distances are the kinds of elements I seek. As I

sit and record a scene outdoors, I feel a strong bond with the world around me. Emerson summed up my feelings when he wrote:

> To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says: He is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky,

> without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life -- no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature can not repair. Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God . . .

When I am outside working before my easel, I can breathe the air, see the land, feel the sun and wind, and be assured of my own existence. As the light changes every second, I change also. Nature dictates to me what I am to see and paint and I must obey by putting on canvas my impressions. I

never tire of looking or feeling. I can feel the environment around me and am aware of the effect it has on my work.

By working on large canvases, I find that I can vent my feelings in a more vigorous manner. The pictures flow in broader strokes and colors. The size makes a recreation of the vastness of the world outside and I would hope engulfs the viewer with the fact that nature is indeed a powerful force. The earth, the light, the air have a permanency that is denied to me. It will exist long afer my death, but I am filled with gratitude to have experienced such a small part of it.

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